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AUNT MARIA

By NELIA GARDNER WHITE

The first intimation I had of the trip to Aunt Maria's was my mother's "But there's Uncle Reuben—you know how he is!"—and my father's "Oh, shucks! Uncle Reuben, drunk or sober, wouldn't hurt a mouse—and the country air'll do Johnny good!" I remembered Aunt Maria vaguely. She had visited us once, without Uncle Reuben. I knew she had a big mole, as big as a penny, on the side of her face. I knew of a family joke (though I didn't understand it) that had to do with her. It concerned a school teacher who had boarded at Aunt Maria's and now and again Mother would lean over and tap Father's knee with a thimble finger and say in a tone of righteous disapproval, "And how do you suppose she spelled 'knee,' Anna? *K-n-double e!*" Father never failed to put his head back and roar.

So there I was at Aunt Maria's. The mole was there, bigger and browner than ever. I would watch it sometimes, as Aunt Maria went at an ear of green corn, with awe and fascination. It almost seemed to have a separate life of its own. Uncle Reuben was there, too, and I liked him even better than the mole. He was a mild little man who always wore blue suspenders and bright pink armbands. Though Aunt Maria's hair was black as coal, and thick, his was gray and there was a thin place on top. The very first day he endeared himself to me by saying, "Maria, this boy wants another piece o' elderberry pie!"

It wasn't many days before I began to feel sorry for Uncle Reuben. I'll never forget the first time Aunt Maria really let go at Uncle Reuben in my presence. He'd been berrypicking — he was the kind that *would* go berrypicking — and he came home about four and set his pail down on the kitchen table. Aunt Maria came running in from the henhouse (she always went on a kind of brisk, nervous trot), and the minute she saw the pail, she stuck her nose down close to it.

"Reuben Plants!" she said shrilly. "Reuben Plants, do you mean to tell me these is all the berries you got in a hull day up the Run? Don't tell me! Such seedy little runts, too! Not enough for a couple decent pies! Why, Johnny could've done more'n that in half an hour! You've been off somewheres with Al Palmatier, that's what! Come here! I thought so! I can smell it plain as codfish on yu! Ain't you ashamed — and before Johnny, too! You're lazy as a Potter County poormaster, Reuben Plants, and I dunno what I ever married you for! Off laying around drinkin' cider up the Run and me here work, work, working, like to break every bone in my body!"

Aunt Maria just seemed to go on and on — it was a joy to watch her, her mole working up and down, her black eyes snapping, her voice getting shriller and shriller. Uncle Reuben presently melted away, drifted out to the porch with the dog. I think yet, in a puzzled way, of the twinkle in his eye as I went out and sat on the other side of the dog. It was a wistful twinkle, if that's possible, and seemed to give Uncle Reuben wisdom. "Lazy as a Potter County poormaster" — without having any notion of what it meant or why a Potter County poormaster should be lazy, I used to think that a masterly phrase. I would turn it over in my mind, stealing glances at Uncle Reuben with designs to fit it to him. It never did fit, but it was a good phrase, nevertheless.

Aunt Maria was "pizen clean." She kept tidies on all

her chairs and put tray cloths at our places at the table. She scrubbed the front porch on her hands and knees. She always had bedding out on the line, and you could, as the neighbors said, "eat off of her kitchen floor." It was due to that "Pizen cleanness" that Uncle Reuben came in for many outbreaks. One day I came from the hen-house with the eggs and I heard Aunt Maria's voice when I was clear back by the well. I hurried.

"... Mud — mud — mud — it's all I see from sun-up till dark, Reuben Plants! You track in more mud in a summer 'n they see over to the Swale in ten years! Was you brought up in a pig sty? Was you? You'd better get back there, then — I'm sick to death of goin' around with a mop everywhere you set your dirty feet down. I sh'd think you'd have some regard to what the neighbors say if you don't for me! Where you going — *where you going, I say?* Don't you dast to go in that other room, Reuben Plants! Get out on that back porch and take them shoes off! Reuben! Are you deaf? Get out of here! Do you want to turn this into a pig sty like you was brought up in?"

Uncle Reuben came meekly out on the back steps and took off his shoes. It seems to me now, though I can't be sure, that he winked at me as he began to scrape off mud.

A few days after that Uncle Reuben went up into the attic after some fish line. It was not till after we'd come back from a happy afternoon by the creek that Aunt Maria's wrath descended. She stood in the doorway, her clean apron standing out around her like stiff-starched armour of righteousness. Her black hair seemed drawn back even tighter than commonly, and her eyes snapped.

"Reuben Plants — will you never learn to use the little sense God gave you?" she began.

"What's the matter, Maria?" I was thinking of the stories Uncle Reuben had been telling me about when

he was a little boy. He had been a bold little boy, bold and bad. I've thought a good deal since about those stories. Did Uncle Reuben have, perhaps, the fiction mind? I know that, even then, I had a distinct feeling of being let down when Uncle Reuben said so apologetically, "What's the matter, Maria?"

"Matter? What's the matter? You stand there and ask me what's the matter, Reuben Plants? I suppose you'll tell me next you weren't up in the attic this morning? Pawin' over every box up there? Haven't you got eyes to see what's marked on 'em plain as day? Or anyways a tongue in your head to ask me? And there was my best goosefeather pillows just tossed out anyway and that box of hat-trimmings I've been saving ever since we got married — just strewed around! And that ostrich feather that's two feet long if it's an inch, and got a curl in it that couldn't be beat to this day — on the floor with the rest it was! And what if mice had got at it and chewed it? What if they had, I say?"

"Now, Maria! I guess 'twa'n't so bad as you make out!" he began feebly.

"What? What's you say? 'Twa'n't so bad, eh? I guess if you'd been down on your knees up there the whole afternoon, settin' things to rights, you'd 've thought 'twas bad enough! It's well enough for you to sit wearin' your pants out on the creek bank, but there's some as has some pride in their home! I s'pose the garden could rot afore you'd ever put a hoe to it, and what about that trellis you been aimin' to fix all summer?"

Uncle Reuben had really shrunk by now, become a very meek little old shadow of a man and his bright pink armbands and bold suspenders seemed too bold and loud for him.

Then came the day that Uncle Reuben got drunk. On Aunt Maria's elderberry wine, too. Off the room that was my bedroom, was a little attic part. One day I saw

Uncle Reuben going through my bedroom to this little cubby hole and I followed him. He sat on an old box, the one, perhaps, that contained the two foot ostrich feather, and he had in his hands a brown jug. I thought it was the molasses jug and was instantly curious about it. Uncle Reuben looked strangely different to me. He sat up unnaturally straight and kept his chin in with a stiffness out of all reason for a man sitting in an attic. He was smiling with such a pleased smile that it was silly. He winked one eye at me with slow, laborious pleasantry.

"Been up here two years, right foreninst the chimbly!" he said, and pulled in his chin so far that he seemed to have no chin at all. "Come 'ere, Johnny! Take a sniff o' that, now! God does look after his children — you don't ever want to forget that, Johnny! Right foreninst the chimbly!"

Uncle Reuben seemed such a stranger that I crept out of the attic and left him alone with the molasses jug. The sniff I'd had, though, wasn't like molasses. More like an elderberry pie that'd gone bad.

After a long time, Uncle Reuben came down stairs. He was singing at the top of his voice, and Uncle Reuben was not what one would call a singing man. The song was about one Lighthorse Harry. Only one line comes to me now, though I have never heard a song that impressed me more. That line was — "*Then* high in his saddle hove Lighthorse Harry!" The *then* was strongly emphasized as if *now* began the telling of the greatest adventure of them all.

I sat out on the back steps as the roar of "Lighthorse Harry" came down the back stairway, but I got up and came quickly into the kitchen where Aunt Maria was rolling cookies. I remember how her mole seemed to rise suspiciously as she stood still by the table. It stopped quivering and her chin seemed to shoot forward. And then came Uncle Reuben — not the meek little man

who scraped mud off his shoes, but a bold swashbuckler of Lighthorse Harry's band. He did something then that gives me pleasure even yet to recall. Aunt Maria was not one to invite tenderness—I doubt if she ever had. But Uncle Reuben stepped up to her, with that complacent silly smile on his face, and chucked Aunt Maria under the chin as if she'd been a saucy barmaid.

"Little gooseberry!" he said indulgently.

As gooseberry pie was Uncle Reuben's favorite, that was high compliment. But the little gooseberry began to snort. Her voice shook with its rage.

"Reuben Plants, you been a-drinkin'!" she shrilled at him. "You been a-drinkin'—you been a-drinkin'!"

"Now, Maria!" he said with a bold smile.

Her black eyes began to snap.

"I'll 'now, Maria' you!" she said. She lifted the rolling pin and I can feel yet how the hair went bristling at the back of my neck. But she didn't hit him.

"Now, Maria!" Uncle Reuben said again, in mild propitiation. "I ain't had but a little thimble o' wine!"

"Thimble? *Thimble?* Reuben Plants, you're fuller 'n a cistern! Get outa this kitchen! Get!"

She began to push him with the rolling pin, and he began to back out onto the porch, saying—"Now, Maria!" at every step, his assurance growing weaker each moment.

At the steps she took his arm and gave him a shove and then pushed him along the walk that led past the currant bushes and the lettuce and onion bed to the henhouse. She talked all the way.

"In front o' Johnny, too! You oughta be so ashamed you wouldn't know where to show your head! What'll his ma think? Tell me that! Leavin' her boy where there's a drunken sot!"

"Now, Maria!"

"Yes, drunken sot you are—that's what I said. You're worse'n that! You're a disgrace to the commu-

nity, that's what you are! You oughta go live up Heathen Hollow! There's your kind! Givin' up their lives to guzzlin' whiskey and livin' loose lives! Get along there — yes, you're a-goin' in to the henhouse! Yes, you are — now don't you sass me back one word neither, or I'll likely crack you over the head with this rollin' pin! Get in there! You shut your head, Reuben Plants! Nor don't you open it till you've got good 'n' sober again!"

She fastened the bolt on the henhouse door and went back to her cookies. Every few moments her shoulders and head shook as with rage. I heard Uncle Reuben singing presently and I crept out to the henhouse and listened at the door. But he had forgotten "Lighthorse Harry" now and was singing something about — "Why don't they kiss me, just the same as sister May?" It was a sad song and Uncle Reuben seemed to have to stop often to cry about it.

At supper time Aunt Maria went out to the henhouse. The baking was done and the house spotless and Aunt Maria in the more or less calm mood that always came upon her at this hour. But when she came to the henhouse her calm vanished. I heard her give a little scream.

"Johnny!" she called then. "*Johnny* — come right here! Did you let your Uncle Reuben out of here? Did you?"

"No, Aunt Maria!"

"The skunk! The low-lived, drunken skunk!" said Aunt Maria with conviction.

But Uncle Reuben did not come home that night. Nor yet the next day nor the next. At first Aunt Maria said,

"He's gone off on a toot, that's what! Let 'im go!"

But on the third day she didn't talk about him. She didn't talk at all but became unnaturally still and sober. Now and then she would trot out to the road and, with her hand up to her eyes, peer down the road. But Uncle

Reuben did not come back. It was queer there without his meek figure running about doing errands for Aunt Maria and his kindly understanding smiles for me.

One night I heard her crying in her bedroom and, moved by a child's compassion, I got out of bed and went to her room and crept under the covers beside her. She kept on with her crying and it seemed to hurt me, it was so tight. I snuggled close to her.

"His feet was always cold, too!" she said, and put her arm around me.

Every night at supper time she set his place and she baked his favorite cakes and pies and custards and then never touched them. I gorged myself.

"Johnny," she would say to me, sighing, "a sharp tongue's the devil's own instrument! I guess I'm payin' for mine!" Or—"After all, lots of good men have drunk! What's a thimble of wine when you've been married to a man thirty years? He was good in lots of ways, your Uncle Reuben, Johnny. He never was one to chaw, anyhow, and that's filthier 'n drinkin', even!"

And one night she walked up to the pond past the Settlement cemetery. On the way back she wiped her eyes often.

"I have a forebodin', Johnny," she said in a trembling voice. "I have a forebodin' that Reuben's drowned!"

She had Ed Gallup and his brother drag the pond and I remember wondering if the stretch would have all gone out of Uncle Reuben's tight armbands, lying in the water so long. But they didn't find Uncle Reuben.

One night I came in and found her sewing on a length of stiff black cloth.

"I gotta show my feelings somehow!" she said. So Aunt Maria put on mourning, heavy mourning that made me think of Sister Mary Francis who taught at a school near our house. It was a hot summer, but she sweltered

in her black at Aid meetings and church and afternoons. I remember seeing her on the porch with her tatting, rocking as she tatted, and she would look so really sad and doleful that I would pity her. She never snapped now and I missed it. I got homesick those days.

"Always remember to hang onto your tongue!" she told me over and over. "If you don't it'll break your heart some day!"

The neighbors spoke of her as "Poor Mis' Plants" and often stopped in to commiserate with her.

"Mebbe he'll show up yet!" one would say. "There's lots of cases like that in the papers — where folks just wanders off and forgets who they is! Like as not that happened to Reuben!"

"Don't seem like he could forget me 'n' the house we've lived in thirty year!" Aunt Maria answered mournfully. "No, I ain't any faith in that notion! Reuben's dead, he is!"

Once I heard the minister say, "We never know what's to be God's will, Sister Plants!"

Aunt Maria said stubbornly, "I know God never willed that my Reuben should be took, Elder Packer — he was the best man in this town, or county, either, for that matter!"

And one night I found her looking over a Sears and Roebuck catalogue.

"Do you favor that one, Johnny?" she appealed to me. "Or this one with the angels on? I don't want to skimp when it comes to doin' the right thing by Reuben's memory!"

Tombstones!

"I thought I'd set it up under the black walnut tree — he was so fond of settin' there to whittle!" she said.

But, fortunately, she did not buy the tombstone.

One hot July night I went up to the postoffice and when I came back and went 'round, as often reminded, to the back door, Uncle Reuben sat on the back steps. I

can remember yet how my heart seemed to come up into my throat and choke me. Somehow I had Uncle Reuben very definitely settled in the bottom of the yard (or, sometimes, under the tombstone beneath the walnut tree), and it gave me a terrible shock to see him in the flesh. But it was Uncle Reuben, and though I didn't know then just what ailed him, it comes to me now that it was painfully evident he had been on a prolonged and thorough toot. The shirt was the identical one he had worn away, purple stripes and all, and it had probably not been washed in the month of his absence. There was a slit in one trouser knee and on his face a disreputable beard. He was a forlorn Uncle Reuben, but he looked up as he saw me approaching and I think—no, I'm sure—he winked at me. There was still in him a shadow of "Lighthorse Harry."

"Well, Johnny," he said cheerfully, "I've been raised from the dead!"

I opened my mouth, but I didn't answer him. Aunt Maria had heard his voice and come running to the kitchen door. Her black dress billowed around her like a whirlwind and her black eyes seemed to fill her white face.

"*Reuben!*" she cried. In that word was all the loneliness of the past weeks. Then she took in his dirt and his beard and his rags and his unrepentance. Her eyes began to snap and I felt a pleasant though terrifying tingling up my spine. "*Reuben Plants!*" she began shrilly and the mole began to work up and down like a bug in an animated movie cartoon. "*Reuben Plants!* Do you mean to tell me you have the gall to show your face inside this yard again? And, anyhow, a face like that? Be there any razors left in the world or be there not? Or soap, either? Where was you brought up, I'd like to know, that you could dare to go like that? Is that your bare knee sticking right out? And Elder and Mrs. Packer settin' on their front stoop! Ain't it enough

that you should go off and leave me do the hoein' and diggin' and everything stark livin' alone, without comin' back lookin' like a Heathen Hollow bum? Ain't it? Ain't you any consideration for me whatever? Or for what the neighbors think? Get them shoes off quicker 'n fly and get the mud scraped offen 'em, and then you get in here and strip yourself and get into the washtub! I can do your hair with a bowl, I guess. There's one sure thing, you ain't going to be seen till you get cleaned up! Oh, Lord, seems as if I couldn't *stand* much more o' you, Reuben Plants! Here I work, work, work, fit to kill myself from year's end to year's end and all you do is set and whittle and go off on spreeds and undo what I got done! You're lazier 'n a Potter County poor-master, that's what you are, and I don't know as I can put up with you much longer! Get into the house now and get them filthy clothes off! Get!"

I watched him go. He seemed to have shrunk again as he answered her mildly.

"Now, *Maria!*" he said.

FROM A DEAD BABY

By SARA HIMLINSKY

Dear God, you promised me
Six feet of ground,
Six feet of muddy dirt
Heaped in a mound.

Dear God, you've stingy grown.
Is there a dearth
That you should give me but
Two feet of earth?

. . . This earth I have not yet
Learned to despise. . . .
Dear God, you've stingy grown,
Or you speak lies!

POEMS

By CHARLES MALAM

THREE BURRS

Now I may raise my head and prouder be
Since life has made a messenger of me,

And earth, desiring one more weed to marry,
Has touched my arm and given me to carry

Three withered burrs, September's seeds, to take
To new fields for the universe's sake, —

For earth's sake, and for life that finds in me
One who can bear three burrs courageously.

WOOD TO CUT

There is a summoning down the road,
There is a trumpeting in the sky;
The far hills harvest their bronzen load
And the road calls into the distant haze
And the earth is hushed as the wild geese cry.

Someone back in the long-ago,
Standing here at the end of the walk,
Heard this call through the amber glow
Of sunset over the haze-tipped hills —
And here is his road now, white as chalk.

I could answer the summons, too;
I could learn about primal desire
And follow his white path into the blue —
But there's leaves to rake, and the chores to do,
And wood to cut for the winter fire.

THE BREAK

By JOHN UPTON TERRELL

He was beating his way on the Illinois Central out of East St. Louis for Mound City. It was a long, cold ride down along the Mississippi River bottoms. The country was dead under a white blanket of snow. The trees were black. You rarely saw a light at night. The railroad was only a "feeder" for St. Louis from the main line running from the Gulf to Chicago.

He was traveling alone in a reefer. A reefer is a refrigerator car. Bums like to ride reefer trains because they usually carry only through perishable freight and waste no time on the road. Even running empty, reefer trains make good time. They bring more revenue to the railroads than ordinary freight trains, and are kept moving.

Toward evening he made a tiny fire with some straw in one end of the car. On the up trip there had been bananas in the car. He found a few eatable ones lying about the floor. You have to watch out for tarantulas in banana cars. Once in a while they come up from the tropics on fruit. If one bites you, you will say: "Hello, St. Peter."

Very little smoke came from the fire, and it gave out some heat. If a reefer once becomes heated, it remains that way for some time. The principle is the same way with cold. . . . After he had burned all the straw, he ran up and down waving his arms and stamping his feet. There hadn't been enough straw to heat the car.

Later, something fell from the trucks under his car and dragged along between the wheels. He could hear it hitting against the ties. The sound filled him with fear. He stood trembling in a corner of the cold, dark car. Soon whatever was dragging would catch in a switch, and the train would be wrecked. He would be crushed to death . . . trapped like a rat. His head

whirled with the horror of the thought. He recoiled against the wall.

He stood like a man in a trance . . . but something caused him to suddenly become again active. There was only one way to save himself . . . stop the train. He ran the length of the car and crashed up against the bulkhead. He was "highsterical" . . . there might be death any second. He had suffered to live eight years on the road . . . now he was fighting to keep on living.

He climbed up the bulkhead, and squeezed out through an ice-loaded hatch in the roof. The train was running at high speed along the river bank. It was nearly dark. The water glistened silvery and cold through the black trees. Outside, the noise from the dragging bar was deafening. . . . Soon it would catch in a switch. The train would roll into the icy water.

He might jump when the crash came. He gripped a brake rod. When he let go of the cold steel, the skin on his fingers tore. The wind bit through his clothing and stung his flesh. Tears streamed down his face.

He would be dead. . . . He might jump when the crash came. If he was hurt, he would freeze to death before anyone found him. Perhaps he would lie in the snow along the right of way slowly freezing to death. It was only a matter of choice . . . to stay or not to stay.

He decided to stay. He began to run over the tops of the cars. He fell, clutching madly at the roof walk. He leaped recklessly from car to car. Far ahead he could see the night flash red when the fireman opened the fire door to feed coal into the hungry mouth of the thundering freight engine. He fell again, clutched at the roof, driving splinters into his torn hands. His coat was blown open, but his hands were too numb to button it. When he climbed down over the coal into the cab of the engine, he had very little feeling left in his body. He sank down beside the hot boiler.

After all, it was a good break for him. When they had repaired the broken bar, the conductor took him back to the caboose. The stove was red hot. One of the brakemen prepared a meal, and they all sat down to a wall table. There was everything to eat out of cans.

In all probability he had saved the lives of the caboose crew. At least, he had prevented a bad wreck, and kept the crew out of a lot of "dirty explaining." They wanted to show their appreciation, too. He could tell it by their faces; but they were bashful men, and there was only an awkward silence when one of them said anything about it to him. He understood their feeling. . . . He was only a bum, and it was hard for them to thank a bum for anything. After a time, however, the gap seemed to close a bit. A great deal of tension disappeared after they had eaten.

They asked him something about himself. He told them a few things about his life. It was difficult for him, too . . . talking to railroad men on neutral ground, the men he was obliged to avoid whenever he moved from one place to another. He had never been a hero of any sort. . . . His fingers twitched. They were thin and dirty and blue. He had washed away the blood and pulled out some of the slivers. He had a habit of running his fingers through his dark oily hair. At times he talked rapidly, as if he was afraid he would lose their attention. His overcoat had been stolen a few days before in a flop house up in Moline. After that he had started south with newspapers between his underwear and his flannel shirt. A man was through in the valley country in winter if he lost his "benny." How could a man get another? They were scarce as hen's teeth.

"Couldn't you find no work?" one of the brakemen asked.

Work? There wasn't work in the winter . . . not any kind. A man might be able to hang on . . . if he didn't freeze to death some night. But when a man's

"benny" is stolen . . . move south. It was the only thing left for a man to do.

He had planned to go south until he found warm weather. He had stayed over in East St. Louis a few days to get his belly full and a few dimes in his pocket. The station man there was kind, and wouldn't put a man out in cold weather. You could sleep on the floor under benches. If you could find an unoccupied place near a radiator, it wasn't so uncomfortable, but it was crowded most of the time. There were a great many men on the road.

The number of bums made "mooching" difficult . . . very. Anyway a man didn't want to stop and unbutton his coat in the cold, take off a glove, just to give a bum a dime. The restaurants were more fruitful. Greeks in East St. Louis seemed to have a great deal of sympathy for hungry men.

Later he went to sleep in one of the crummy bunks. Crummy in this instance does not mean lousy. The caboose is called the crummy by hoboes. The conductor threw a blanket over him with a careless motion, but after he had fallen asleep one of the brakemen covered him carefully. When he awakened, he discovered that his shoes had been removed. The conductor and the two brakemen had been too bashful to do these things while he was awake.

He wakened at midnight. The train was in the freight yards at Mound City. A man who sleeps a great deal on trains will waken if the train stops for any length of time.

The conductor and one of the brakeman were waiting for him to waken. They sat beside the red stove, smoking their pipes. At first it was pretty hard for him to move. His legs and arms were stiff and sore. At last he got over near the stove, and the fierce heat seemed to absorb some of the soreness. The conductor gave him a match and he lit a cigarette.

The train men told him they would get him a room in the depot hotel. Tomorrow the conductor would see about getting him a job on the railroad. The conductor was pretty sure that he could get him a job as a student brakeman. They would help him to get started. A fairly good living came of railroading these days, they told him. The money was good and there was plenty of work.

He went to bed in the depot hotel. The trainmen had collected five dollars for him. He had it in his pants pocket, and slept with his hand on it. He hadn't bothered to undress, simply removed his shoes and rolled up in a blanket. Five dollars! It was a break for him. A man could live on the road a long time on five dollars.

In the morning he went downstairs to the depot restaurant. His first thought was to "mooch" a meal, but the "fiver" burned in his pocket. He ate like a "swell." When he had finished eating, he went out on the platform, jingling the money in his pocket. It was sunny . . . much warmer than in East St. Louis. His belly was full of oat meal, hot cakes, doughnuts and coffee. He felt refreshed. Most of the soreness had left his body.

A freight was pulling slowly past the depot on the southbound track. He stood there puffing a cigarette and watching the cars slip by him.

Hell! He didn't want a job on any railroad. Why should he go to work as long as there was "jack" in his pocket? It was warm and sunshiny in New Orleans. He had enough money to carry him there in comfort.

He ran along the platform until he was going at an equal speed with the train. Then he swung aboard on a ladder, climbed to the top of the car and dropped into an ice-loading hatch. It was a reefer train and it would roll right into New Orleans if he stayed on it. New Orleans was the town for hoboes in the winter. During the "Mardee Grass" carnival everybody hands you a bit of money if you ask for it. "Mooching" then is like taking candy from a baby.

TWO POEMS

By GLENN WARD DRESBACH

THIS IS A NIGHT

The wind has risen from a moan
To the fierce cracking of whips.
The sands will swirl in a furious dance . . .
This is a night when a man alone
Turns on the moving darkness the glance
Of a hunted thing, and moistens his lips
That sting in the wind. He hears the rattle
Of dry grass and the snap of boughs.

This is a night when the lean range cattle,
Heads down, rumps to the wind, are under
The fierce cracking of whips.

This is a night even land of the plows
Trembles with wildness, straining its fences,
Mumbling back to the darkness and thunder.

This is a night the lean wolves prowl —
And a man half kindred to it, half fearing,
Its wildness tingling against his senses,
Stumbles along to the light in the clearing,
And comes to his own staunch walls once more,
Blinks in the sudden light, like an owl —
And slams the door.

JASON

When Jason plowed the stubble,
The plump quail used to stay
About him, and the rabbits
Were slow to run away.

The horses rubbed their noses
Against his shoulder when
He took the creaking harness
And brought them corn again.

But when he went to dances,
The girls all turned away,
And Jason stared and wondered
What he should do or say . . .

They did not know his kindness,
Or if they knew they smiled —
Oh, they were out for hunting
And wanted something wild!

A woman came to visit
The village; dreamy eyed,
She drifted through the dances
And Jason watched and sighed.

But she was watching Jason,
And something in her glance
Knew well, before he knew it,
He'd take her from the dance.

Oh, she was like a plump quail
Warm from the clover nest,
And she was like a sleek mare
Against his shoulder pressed!

She knew too much of hunting . . .
How little there's to find!
And knew enough of Jason:
That he was dumb — and kind.

POEMS

By ELLEN GLINES

CITY PEACE

There is no terror in the city's mass,
Spread out below us here at sunset time;
With no more tenderness the bright clouds pass
Above the forest; here, the hourly chime
Comes sweet as from some belfry, newly white,
Beside a shady common; the rare hoofs
And constant wheels beat rhythms like seas at night,
And God is immanent on these windless roofs.

As natural a dwelling-place men rear
About them as do beavers, birds, or ants,
Having no intrinsic fearfulness, but dear
And serviceable to the inhabitants . . .
Peace — and a spray of golden doves, whirled round
A white steam-spire ascending without sound.

SABBATH OF THE OX

I trample dull unleavened soil;
I wear a yoke, I feel the heat:
My Master, too, is at his toil —
A furrow turns behind my feet.

Yet sometimes come unlooked-for days
When there's no yoke, no sweat, no clod,
And I'm set free to rest, and gaze
On beauty in the fields of God.

INQUIRY AFTER HEALTH

By HARRY HARTWICK

Dad came out the back door with his hat on. While he was backing the car out of the garage, Carl came out of the house and climbed into the front seat beside him.

"Where's Mother and Muriel?" said Dad.

"Muriel had to go to the bathroom."

"Tell them to hurry," said Dad, absently.

Carl fiddled with the things on the instrument board. Pretty soon the back door slammed, and Mother and Muriel came out and got in the back seat. Dad drove down the driveway. As he reached the street, he turned the car to the right and drove north out of town, following the county road north and then east.

It was a hot Sunday afternoon. Dust swirled up behind the car as it bumped along. But a warm breeze rippled the fields of green wheat beyond the barbed wire fences on each side of the road. The wind sang in the telephone wires overhead.

"Did you bring Grandpa's box?" asked Dad.

"It's down here by Muriel's feet," said Mother from the back seat. Dad twisted round to look.

"All right," he said. They drove along through clouds of dust spinning up from beneath the wheels of cars that passed them going the other way. No one said anything for a long while. Muriel clutched Mother's arm with her tiny hand and gazed over the side of the car at the fields of waving wheat. Carl sat up straight like Dad and studied the road ahead.

"It's certainly dusty," said Mother.

Dad nodded:

"It's hard to see the cars goin' the other way."

"Well, be careful."

"I am careful."

There was a silence for a moment.

"Grandpa didn't say what was the matter with him in his letter," said Mother.

"Likely it's his kidneys again," said Dad.

"The folks in charge should've let us know when he took sick."

"He's all right. Haven't they got a hospital right there at the Home?"

"It's not the same as your own folks, though."

"I know."

"Well, it's not like your own folks."

"I guess not. But he's all right."

Mother shook her head.

"I'm ashamed we haven't gone down oftener."

"Never mind. We'll soon be there now."

About two o'clock, they reached Le Sage. The dusty street was almost deserted. A solitary man was standing in front of the barber shop, peering in through the plate glass window with his hands cupped to his face. As the car stopped, he turned round. There was a dark smudge of whiskers across his face. He looked very sad.

Dad leaned out of the car.

"Where's everybody?"

"I dunno."

"Can we get something to eat somewhere?"

"Everybody's went over to the ball game."

"Where's that?"

" 'Cross the tracks."

"Who's playin'?"

"A nigger team from Omaha and some fellows from Carney."

"Well, it's this way. We want to find something to eat."

"Goin' far?"

"No. You see, we could go right on out to the Home."

"Oh — out to the Home."

"But we thought we'd just stop and get a bite in town before we drove on out."

"We left home about noon," said Mother.

The man looked at Mother. He seemed to be con-

sidering this. His face was very sad. Finally he looked back at Dad.

"Maybe you could get somethin' at the station," he said.

He pointed up the street.

"Thanks," said Dad.

Mother nodded at the man and smiled.

At the end of the street, they came upon a little red railway station, sitting beside a pair of rusty tracks. There was an empty box car standing on the siding that was almost as big as the station itself. Some distance beyond the tracks, in an open meadow, they could make out a crowd of people and a lot of automobiles parked around. From time to time, the light breeze brought the sound of cheering from the direction of the meadow.

Dad parked the car in a clump of weeds by the baggage platform. A trunk with a lot of labels on it was standing on the end of the platform. They climbed out of the car and went into the waiting room of the station. The room was deserted. On one wall was a large colored map of the state and an advertising calendar. To the left was a ticket window with a small green blind pulled down behind it. Above the window was a clock. On the other side of the room was a screen door with some flies buzzing around it. The screen had a hole in it that had been plugged with a piece of blue rag. That was the lunch room door. They went in.

Nobody was in the lunch room, except a man with a red mustache. He was sitting on a stool at the counter, reading a newspaper. When they came in, he got up and walked around behind the counter. He had a towel wrapped round his waist for an apron.

"What'll it be?" said the man, folding up the newspaper.

"What do you want, Mother?" said Dad.

"You order." Mother looked frightened.

"Well, I don't know what you want."

"I don't want anything particular. You order."

"Isn't there something you'd like to have?"

"I'll take what you get. It doesn't make any difference to me."

"Well, you got to eat something. How about some eggs?"

"All right. Whatever you get's all right."

"No eggs," said the man.

"No eggs?" asked Dad.

The man shook his head and went on reading something in the newspaper.

"What have you got?" said Dad.

The man looked up from the newspaper.

"We got cereals," he said, "and we got ham sandwiches." He pointed to some round sandwiches sitting on the counter under a glass dome.

"Have you got coffee?" said Dad.

"We got coffee all right."

"I guess I'll take a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee."

The man looked at Mother.

"You order," said Mother to Dad, looking scared.

"All right," said Dad. "She wants the same thing."

The man nodded and turned round and poked the folded newspaper into the shelf behind him. He pulled out two cups from beneath the counter. Then he walked to the other end of the counter and, holding the two cups in one hand, drained some coffee into them from a blue coffee pot sitting on a little oil burner stove. He put the cups in front of Mother and Dad and lifted up the glass dome and took out two sandwiches. He put each one on a plate and gave one to Dad and one to Mother. Then he stopped and wiped his hands on his apron. He looked at Muriel and Carl and then back at Dad.

"I guess we'll take two glasses of milk too," said Dad.

"Do you have milk?"

The man nodded, reached down under the counter for a couple of glasses, wiped them out with a corner of his

apron, and filled them with milk from a bottle on the shelf behind him. He slid one glass in front of Muriel and one in front of Carl.

They ate in silence. Mother didn't eat all of her sandwich. The man had picked up his newspaper and was reading it again. When they had finished, Dad asked how much.

The man folded up his newspaper.

"Forty cents. Ten cents for sandwiches."

Dad laid the money on the counter, and they filed out and climbed into the car.

"Well, we're off again," said Dad.

"Was that clock in there right?" said Mother.

"What time did it say?"

"About ten minutes to three."

"It must took about two hours to drive down," said Dad.

He slipped his watch out of his vest pocket, driving with one hand.

"I'm fast."

"What time does yours say?"

"Just about three."

"The clock might've been slow."

Dad shook his head.

"I know I'm fast. I'm always a little fast."

They jolted along the road, skirting the town. There were a few houses where the town fizzled out at the edges. The houses seemed to back up and squat right down in the cornfields. Nothing but cornfields edging the town and banking each side of the road. Among the leafy cornstalks, some sparrows were cheeping and fluttering about.

Presently Mother said:

"There it is."

They all looked. There was the Old Soldiers' Home on a green hill just ahead to the right. On the very top of the smooth hill was a little nest of red brick buildings

with a flag flying above one. From the buildings, a white driveway ran down the green slope to the road. It was a pretty sight. They could almost hear the flag snapping up there in the blue air.

They drove up the winding driveway. Here and there, some old men and women were sitting on the lawn.

"I always wondered why they let married folks live here," said Mother.

"Why?" said Dad.

"I don't know. I just do."

"I don't see why," said Dad. "It's perfectly all right."

Dad stopped the car in front of the office, and they got out and went in. The office was small, with a desk running across it. Behind the desk were some files and a table with some papers on it. To the left, in front of the desk, was a door leading somewhere. As they entered, a man opened this door and came in.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," said Dad. "Could you tell us where to find Mr. Voltmer?"

"You mean 'Grandpa'?" said the man, smiling.

Mother smiled. He seemed like a nice polite young man.

"I suppose you knew that he was sick?" said the man.

Dad nodded.

"He's in the hospital," said the man. "We can go this way."

They followed the man through the door and down a long dark hall. There were doors at intervals on each side.

"He's in here," said the man, stopping by a door.

They edged in. It was a long room with white walls and white curtains at the windows. Running the length of the room was a double row of beds with an aisle between. They started nervously up the aisle. Mother

walked in front with the man. The room smelled of medicine.

Carl watched the old men in the beds they passed. Some of the old men were sitting up and staring at them. Others were asleep with their white heads on the white pillows. There were little tags on the ends of the beds. Carl fingered some of them as he passed. Muriel squeezed on tightly to Dad's hand.

Once they stopped while the man explained something to Mother. The man was showing her how the beds could be washed without making whoever was sleeping in the bed get out. Carl tried to move up and see what was going on. He wanted to see what they were doing. But Dad held his hand. The old man whose bed they were examining rose up as they stopped and leaned forward to watch them. He watched every move they made.

When they started on, he sat up still straighter and said:

"Hello."

Carl wanted to say hello, but Dad tugged him on. Carl looked back. The old man was staring after them, looking disappointed. Carl felt sorry for him.

"He always says hello to everybody that comes in here," explained the man. Mother nodded sympathetically.

Finally they stopped before a bed.

"Here's Grandpa!" said Mother suddenly.

That's right, thought Carl, there he is.

Grandpa was sitting up with a pillow stuffed between his back and the head of the bed. There was a little white table by the bed with some medicine bottles on it.

"How are you, Grandpa?" said Dad. He felt awkward.

"I'm all right." Grandpa grinned bashfully. His hands looked long and shiny, and he kept picking at the covers.

The man who had brought them in got some chairs for Mother and Dad.

"We wouldn't have known you were sick if it hadn't been for your letter," said Mother.

"I just thought I'd drop a line or two," said Grandpa.

"I'd think the people here would let you know when folks get sick."

"I don't know."

"I told the man who showed us in here that I thought it ought to be a rule."

Dad looked shocked.

"Did you, Mother?"

"Certainly I did."

"Maybe you shouldn't have done that."

"Why?"

"Maybe they wouldn't like it."

"Well, it's no more'n right they should."

There was a silence.

"Aren't you going to say hello to Grandpa, Muriel?" said Dad.

Muriel pressed closer to Mother's knee and looked shyly over her shoulder at Grandpa.

"Hello," said Grandpa, smiling.

"Hello."

"How about you, Carl?" said Dad.

Carl wasn't afraid. He liked Grandpa.

"Hello."

"Hello," said Grandpa.

"How long you been sick?" said Dad to Grandpa.

"I don't know. About a week."

"We didn't know anything about it till you wrote."

"A week ago today I remember I didn't feel very good."

"Where do you hurt?"

Grandpa beamed.

"I hurt here, but not very much. Here I hurt mostly."

He rubbed his back proudly. Mother went "Tck, Tck" with her tongue, and Dad shook his head.

"Kidneys, most likely," said Dad.

"The doctor said maybe it was no more'n a touch of neuralgia."

"It might be neuralgia at that."

"He said I ought to have my teeth pulled out."

"Well, maybe."

"He says sometimes it's your teeth."

"It might be kidneys."

"Kidneys is lower down," said Mother.

"You can't tell. It might not be kidneys."

Dad picked up the box from the floor.

"Well, Grandpa, here's something to eat, anyway," he said, brightening as if he had just discovered the box for the first time.

"Just some chicken and cookies," said Mother.

"It's in a shoe box," added Carl.

Grandpa beamed.

"Well now, look here. You've got enough bother," he said to Mother. Mother waved his protest away. She looked red and pleased.

"Why, nonsense. I've got plenty of time."

"I wouldn't have wrote you."

"Now, Grandpa!"

"All right," said Grandpa, laughing. "I won't argue any more."

Everybody laughed.

"It makes me think of when we lived on the farm. Chicken on Sundays," said Dad.

"We had chicken pretty near every Sunday, I guess," added Mother.

"I'd think running a grocery store, you'd have chicken now," said Grandpa.

"Not near as much," said Dad. He looked at Mother to prove it.

"Not near as much," said Mother.

"Sometimes I wish I was back on the farm," Dad went on. "It's healthier."

"It's not very good for schools, though," said Mother.

"We have to begin thinking of what's best for Carl and Muriel," explained Dad.

"In the country, they had too far to go."

"If it was me, I'd move back to the farm today," said Dad.

Mother looked surprised.

"Would you, Dad?"

"Of course I would," said Dad, flushing.

"You never said that before."

"I would, though."

"Well, that's the first I heard of it."

"It's healthier, that's why," said Dad, still red.

There was a silence.

"I'll bet it gets pretty dull here on Sundays," said Dad, at last.

"Sunday's just the same as any other days," said Grandpa. "You see we don't do anything on any of the days."

"Maybe you're right. I never thought of it that way."

Grandpa looked triumphant.

"We never do anything different. That's why," he explained.

There was another silence.

Two bent old men, their hats in their hands, had been standing by a nearby bed and watching all that had been going on. They looked as if they wanted to come over, but were afraid. One was a short man; the other was a tall man with a handful of white whiskers on his chin. Finally they did come over.

"We just come over to say hello to Grandpa," said the short man. "We didn't want to be intrudin'."

"We didn't aim to intrude," declared the tall man with the white whiskers.

"Why, you're not intruding at all," said Mother.
"Won't you sit down?"

Dad stood up and offered his chair.

"No," said the short man. "I said to the Major here, 'We'll just drop by and say hello to Grandpa on the way out.'"

He reached over and shook Grandpa's hand.

"We didn't aim to intrude," said the tall man, examining the medicine bottles on the little stand by the bed.

"How are you today, Grandpa?" said the short man.

"Oh, I'm all right."

"The boys were askin' about you."

"Were they?" Grandpa quivered with pleasure.

"Ab said if I saw you to tell you hello."

"He did?"

"Yep."

"Tell Ab hello from me."

"I will."

They were silent, a little embarrassed by the others.

"Well, we better be goin'," said the tall man.

"We oughta go," seconded the other. "We can't stay."

They backed away and hurried up the aisle to the door.

"They looked like nice men," said Mother when they had gone.

"The short one's name is John," said Grandpa.

"What's his last name?" asked Dad.

"Buford's his last name."

"I thought all the time he looked like a man I met once."

"What was his name?"

"His first name was John, but his last name was Demmick or Dennis or something."

"This man's name's Buford."

Dad shook his head. After a moment, he looked round at Mother.

"Maybe we ought to be going."

"What time is it?"

Dad tugged his thick nickel watch from his vest pocket and studied it seriously for a moment.

"About five-seventeen. I can't say, though; I'm a little fast."

"It took us about two hours to drive down," said Mother.

"How're the roads?" asked Grandpa.

Dad pressed his watch back into his pocket.

"The roads are good."

"It's awful dusty, though," added Mother.

"Yes, it's dusty all right."

"Well, don't hurry off," said Grandpa.

"We don't want to go, but I think we'd better," said Dad.

A gloomy expression fixed itself on Grandpa's face as if he were going to cry.

Dad and Mother looked at each other. Both shifted uneasily in their chairs. Finally Dad forced a laugh and got up.

"Well, Grandpa, we'd better be going."

Mother got up too. She looked at Muriel.

"Has the cat got your tongue, Muriel?" she said, bending down and whispering. "Can't you say goodbye to Grandpa?"

Muriel looked shy, and Grandpa smiled.

"Come over here," said Grandpa. He reached out his thin hand and stroked Muriel's hair.

"What's the matter? Don't you like your old Grandpa?"

Muriel nodded timidly. Grandpa looked at her for a long time, and his face grew sober. At last he drew his hand back and said in a sad voice:

"You're as tiny and nice as — a flea."

Everybody laughed, and Grandpa looked surprised. Then he laughed too. Even Muriel smiled.

"Well," said Dad, "this time we'd better go."

"This time we really are going," said Mother, laughing.

"We brought some chicken and cookies for you," said Carl.

"That's right," Dad agreed. "We come near forgetting that."

"Come over and say goodbye, Carl," said Grandpa. Carl stepped up closer to the bed.

Grandpa smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

"I suppose Carl drives the car around," he said.

Dad laughed.

"He wants it to take his girl riding in, but I won't let him have it."

"I'll bet Carl doesn't have a girl," said Grandpa.

"Well anyway, Christmas he gave somebody a bottle of perfume," said Mother.

Carl blushed, and everybody laughed.

"Well," said Dad, "we really are going."

"It'll be dark before we get home if we don't watch out," said Mother.

Dad picked up the box they had brought for Grandpa.

"The lights on the car aren't just right, anyway," he said. "How about leaving the box in the office?"

"They'll take care of it for you, won't they?" asked Mother.

"Oh, it'll be all right in the office," said Grandpa.

They said goodbye and started down the aisle, Mother and Muriel in front and Dad and Carl following them.

In the office, they found the man who had taken them in. He promised to take care of the box and to see that it got to Grandpa.

The air was cool and peaceful when they went outside. From off toward Le Sage, the soft pealing of a church bell flowed up to them. They sat in the car a moment

before starting and looked across the cornfields toward home. It was turning evening.

"It's sort of nice out," said Mother.

"It's not as hot as it was. It's nice and cool," said Dad.

"You get a fine view from here."

"I can see Le Sage over there," said Carl.

"You certainly can see a long ways," added Mother.

They were silent for a moment, looking off across the darkening fields.

"We'd better hurry before it gets too dark," said Dad. "Well, we're off again."

FATHER OF WATERS

By ALLEN E. WOODALL

Father of Waters, King of all rivers, deep in your dream
of silver and brown

Where rain is lost, and sunshine shivers, and the years
go floating down

With the silt of the land that has fed you so long,
With the powder of stones and the pumice of bones
Of the men and beasts that have heard your song
Through their bits of the night and their fits of the day
On the land that the river is bearing away,
Hear! Hear! Hear!

Go down by the bank where the River is near
On the plain he has shaped as the years wore down;
Now only we know that the rain came down,
The autumn rain in this last of the year,
And the leaves are bright, and the grass is brown.
Who would have dreamed that the River knew
The strange red people our fathers slew,
Ever unknown to us, who tell,
Incredulous now, of the way they went,

Or how and where their chieftains fell?
For blood is a river's sacrament,
Flowing, and going, and bearing away
The hills, and the earth and its living prey.

Father of Waters, Father of men:
Sons and daughters, and death again,
But always the river of silver and brown,
Chafing the ridges and eating the bridges
That swarm with the lights of the credulous town.
Fitfully sleeping, the River is creeping
On past the towers of mushroom growth,
Trying with lips of cold old passion
The long cold bridges the warm men fashion.
Swaying, and glinting, and ever loth
To know they are there, the River goes on
As the wind goes on, and the rain goes on,
As a man that suffers in vain goes on.
Sweeping to nothing from nothing behind —
O River! O deadly, O beautiful, blind
Father of Waters, Father of Waters!

There rose a wind, and there rose a cloud,
And the sun came glimmering in between;
So the wind in the branches cried aloud,
And the sun was a face, and the rain a screen.
An oak tree bent, and clapped his leaves,
And the leaves came down, bright, light, and dear:
This was the gift the ground receives
Of the lonely tree, so every year.
The oak that was born in the heart of the wind
Shuddered his branches, shaggy and thinned,
And the rain on the River was shaken and swept,
And the sun laughed free, and a rainbow leapt
Out of the trees to an arc of the sky,
Flickered and trembled; and through it soon
Peered the face of a haggard and ancient moon.

This we saw, and the wind rode by;
This we saw, and I suddenly knew
The pot of gold at the rainbow's end
As the massed gold leaves that the fast wind blew
From the trees on the hill where they trembled still,
Till the wind, so quickly to gather and spend,
Blew them about us where we stood.
We could not gather them all if we would;
Powder they were, and what were we
If we worshipped the wind and the leaves and the tree,
If we yearned to the rainbow, and haunted the River,
Father of Waters, Father of Waters!
This solvent of beauty he never can see —
Symbol alike of delight and despair
In the night that arises and swallows the day,
In the leaves of each year that are cast on the air,
And the River that carries the mountains away.

Over our puny and passionate dreams
The old mists wash and the old sun gleams,
Down with the silt of the River they go
Like winter-dead things with the new-thawed snow:
Remembrance of men, of their sons and their daughters,
Father of Waters, Father of Waters.

THE SKETCH BOOK

AFTER CORNHUSKING

By LEO L. WARD

His wrist, bare between his leather mitten and the dirty sleeve of his sheepskin, ached slightly with the cold as it rested for an instant on the frosty edge of the barn door. He lifted the latch and went into the early morning dimness of the feedway. Old Kate stirred in her stall and whinnied softly, stretching toward him with her big breast pressing against the oaken manger. The great bay horse beside her began to paw in the stall and to shake his bald face over the feed box.

Milton Kuthe scooped up the cobs from the boxes, flinging them behind him out of the feedway, feeling moist nostrils nuzzling at his wrists each time his hands dipped into the boxes. Then he went along the dark feedway toward the small crib at the rear of the barn, wading knee deep through some piles of straw.

When he opened the rickety crib door he smelt the sweet, raw odor of the "new corn," which he had scooped into the crib only a week ago. A heavy ear came thudding down the long slope of the corn, and he heard the crisp rustle of a husk at his feet. As he knelt slowly upon the corn he felt the ears hard and big under his knees. He began to pile some of the ears into the crook of his left arm, peeling the ribbonny shucks from them with fumbling mittens.

As he came along the feedway the horses again began to paw and to whinny eagerly. As soon as he dropped the corn into the feed boxes he could hear the horses' teeth tearing the grain from the cobs. He lifted a long-handled fork out of a dark corner and carried big bundles of straw from the rear of the feedway. He noticed a slight sudden burnish upon the straw as he lifted each forkful into the manger.

After putting the fork down, Kuthe leaned his big body against the jamb of the feedway door. A soft diffused grayness was spreading over the barnlot outside. Everything was very still. He could hear only the crunching of corn behind him, loud and hollow in the horses' boxes.

Outside, the grayness became brighter. He could hear the crowing of a cock far away on the prairie. A faint, distant voice was calling hogs to an early feeding. He thought he could just hear the thin whanging of a scoop shovel flinging corn from a wagon.

Then he could hear no sound anywhere on the prairie. He looked quietly away at the hills far off to the east, low and gently rolling one into another, distinct now against a gray sky. The farthest and longest of the hills pushed its great smooth dome above the others. He could just see the posts, tiny and black, of a fence that wandered along the slope of this largest hill.

The hills became very distant, unreal. His gaze returned to the cornfields that stretched, almost unbroken, across the prairie. There was no rustling in the corn now. No banging of knockboards all about him in a frosty field. He remembered the tugging rhythm, at his shoulders, in the muscles of his arms—the laborious rhythm of the husking that had grown so monotonous during the long weeks of the fall. An aching tiredness came back for a moment into his hands, and he could feel the wet, cold husking mittens on his fingers, and the hardness of the husking hook against the butt of his thumb. He remembered the lurch and clatter of his wagon moving through the corn beside him, and the turning of its great mud-laden wheels. Then, suddenly the images of the husking left his mind. He gazed absently at the rows of broken stalks, where the wagons had gone through the fields, and his glance fell upon the white insides of open husks clinging to some of the nearer stalks. But farther away the fields were to him only a blur of dull yellow, and farther still, only a gray-

ish veil that drifted toward the hills, rather a vision in his mind than anything real in the world beyond him.

He stood for a long time vaguely looking over the cornfields. Very slowly he began to awaken from the stillness that had crept into his mind like a dream. He heard the big bay horse blowing and snorting softly in the manger behind him, and he was aware of the musty smell of fine straw dust in the air. He turned and saw the black lips of the horse tossing little sprays of straw over the top of the manger into the feedway. He reached over the manger and began to rub the white spot on the horse's head with his mittened hand. The animal was quiet for a moment, then went on pushing the straw out of the manger.

He stepped out of the feedway, turned and fastened the door behind him, then walked slowly across the farm-lot toward a little white house that stood beside a bleak iron windmill. A tendril of blue smoke was creeping along the gray shingled roof, clinging to the eaves for a moment, then uncurling downward before it disappeared. As he walked on, he removed the mittens from his hands and began to pick bits of straw out of the lining of the wristbands. He noticed some small white hairs on the palm of one of the mittens, but he did not try to remove these.

EVENING OF NIBS

By BASIL RAUCH

Nibs poked a bit of grass into the gap between his front teeth and felt its springiness with his tongue. His eyelids drooped, until the houses across the street were all at sixes and sevens. His hard stomach was pressed to the ground, his elbows were propped up, and his chin was deep in the cup of his hands. The grass was cool and a little prickly under his bare shins. Ever so slowly,

he lolled his shoulders, to one side, to the other. There would be grass stains on his white shirt with the silk stripe — clean for supper — at the elbows. His mother would say, “Nibert! After all I’ve told you about lying around! Why didn’t you go to bed if you were tired?” Oh, well —

His father was putting away the lawn mower in the cellar of the house: a hollow metallic roll of the wheels on the cement, then the wooden bang of the handle against the cellar wall. The noise was familiar, yet in the evening stillness, it seemed detached and far away.

Across the street, Mrs. Harcourt sat pensive on her porch swing of green and tan striped canvas, watching the cars glide by. Now and then she raised her hand vaguely to her hair. A sagging corner of newspaper was white against the skirt of her dark dress. After a while the windows of her house were lighted, and she was in shadow, but Nibs could still occasionally see her lifted elbow — a black notch in the oblong of light.

A girl with a fan-shaped cataract of brown curls came slowly roller skating by, her hands clutched softly together behind her back, and her eyes far away. She seemed to be saying, “I am young, and not much concerned with everyday things.”

Nibs eyed her until she turned her steadfast gaze toward him, when he reddened and tried to seem unmindful. “Gurls!”

A car sliding along the street suddenly shot two cones of light ahead. Everything seemed darker after that. The elm trees between the sidewalk and the street became shapes like monstrous tennis racquets.

From down the street came the “rat-a-tat-a-tat” of a stick pulled along the Marlowes’ picket fence. Nibs watched the end of the hedge. Presently a boy emerged, his feet reluctant and his head down, the stick now drawing a wandering line on the sidewalk.

“Hy-a, Skip.”

"Hy-a, Nibs." The stick faltered, then came slowly across the lawn. "I was goin' home."

A square of light was thrown onto the lawn behind them, picking out the spears of grass in hazy yellow relief. Both looked up. Wreathy smoke began to drift through the open window; a newspaper rustled; a throat was cleared satisfyingly.

Skip sat down, ruffled the turf with his fingers. Slivers of grass hopped up and fell.

"Did you cut it?"

"Nah. Dad."

"I hafta cut ours."

The lawns along the street were dark squares now, each separated from its neighbor by a darker line of hedge.

Mrs. Harcourt rose from the swing, making the chains clink a little, and moved into the house, a dark blur along the lighted windows.

Nibs said, "I was kep' in tonight."

"Yeah, she's the limit." Skip tied a shoe lace, fingering it long, and hugging a knee afterwards. "I'm goin' to quit next year."

"I am too, if my dad lets me."

"Maybe mine won't either."

They stared for a while in silence. Far away a trolley ground to a stop, expelled a sigh of compressed air; after a long time it started up again, hummed louder and louder. Then the sound dwindled quickly away, leaving a faint ringing in their ears.

"Well — guess I'll be goin'."

"So long."

"So long . . . see you tomorrow."

The stick trailed off through the grass, the legs beside it trudging tiredly.

It was totally dark now. A cat, standing on the curb with one paw daintily lifted, followed each car, as it passed, with round, challenging eyes. It seemed to say, "I'm

not afraid of you, but I don't understand you, and you smell bad, so I won't cross till you've all gone." A lull in the traffic appearing, it bounded silently across the street.

The porch shades were being drawn up. A sharp jerk, then a more careful pull, the screen shivering thinly.

"Better come in, Nibs, it's getting damp. And get your homework tonight."

"Yessir." Homework! He had never been so dog-tired this spring.

He got up slowly and walked to the stoop. Bits of grass clung to one knee. The other was covered by a knicker leg which had fallen to his ankle. He sat on the step and remained there a long time. Finally he arose, reached for the latch, and wearily pushed the door inward with his shoulder.

I'VE BEEN READING—

By FRANK LUTHER MOTT

It has become fashionable to refer to Lytton Strachey as the daddy of the whole movement known as "the new biography." But, thinking highly as I do of Mr. Strachey's gifts, I am unwilling to impute to him the parenthood of the squirming mass of literature referred to. The new biography is merely a part of that tendency to revalue the past which is characteristic of this yeasty postwar period. Most biographers have learned something from Mr. Strachey's technique, but the essential ideas behind their writings come not from the work of any one man but from the thinking of the world today.

A FORGOTTEN LADY

One of the most striking biographies of the present season is Emanie Sach's *The Terrible Siren* (Harpers, \$4.00). This is the story of Victoria Claflin Woodhull, one of the most remarkable and notorious females in American history. When I saw a four-line notice of her death in England a year or two ago, I said to myself, "What an opportunity for a lurid biography!" And here it is.

Mrs. Woodhull was a professional stormy petrel. She was identified with the movements for spiritism, for woman's rights and for free love; and in every movement in which she took part she was an undoubted leader from the sheer force of her

vigorous and charming personality and keen mind. She precipitated the greatest divorce scandal of our national history—the Beecher-Tilton imbroglio of the 'seventies. She edited an influential weekly paper for many years, and made herself feared, admired, hated, and loved therein. She and her sister Tennie C., financed by Commodore Vanderbilt, were the first "lady brokers" on the New York Stock Exchange. She was the center of so many scandals that it takes Miss Sachs over four hundred pages to tell about them all.

I doubt if Miss Sachs has overlooked any breath of scandal, however. Her rule seems to have been, "When in doubt, believe the worst": everything considered, that is probably the correct principle in Vickie's case, and certainly the most entertaining. The book reads like fiction. It is interestingly illustrated, and possesses a bibliography but no index.

SOME ALMOST FORGOTTEN GENTLEMEN

Classic Shades, by M. A. DeWolfe Howe (Little, Brown, \$2.50), is a series of studies of five American educators and their colleges. Perhaps that is rather too pretentious a description, for these little essays on Timothy Dwight, of Yale; Mary Lyon of Mount Holyoke; Mark Hopkins, of Williams; James McCosh, of Princeton; and Charles W. Eliot, of Harvard are far from exhaustive or exhausting. Most of my readers know that Mr. Howe writes easily and intelligently, like the gentleman he is. His sources for this book are mainly secondary, nor do the protagonists emerge vividly from the pages devoted to them; but the book is pleasant and informative reading.

Another Harvard man, Rollo Walter Brown, has just published a biographical series—*Lonely Americans* (Coward McCann, \$3.50). It is inevitable that the reviewer should compare Professor Brown's treatment of President Eliot with that of Mr. Howe, and it is likewise unavoidable that the comparison should be favorable to the former author. The zest, the detail, the "anecdotalage" of Professor Brown's work give it a fine effectiveness. Much the same may be said of the other chapters in this handsome volume, which deal with James McNeill Whistler, Edward MacDowell, George Bellows, Charles Eliot Norton, Raphael Pumpelly, Emily Dickinson, and Abraham Lincoln. There are ideas in all these sketches: the author is never sleepy, and he really can write. I am especially grateful for the chapters on Pumpelly and the immortal Emily.

GOOD, BETTER, BEST

George W. Cable, His Life and Letters is the official biography of the author of *Old Creole Days* by his daughter, Lucy Leffingwell Cable Bikle (Scribner, \$3.50). I found it interesting. Cable, though not a genius of the first magnitude, was

admirable in the second rank; and his wide acquaintance among literary people makes his letters especially readable. This book clears up the once puzzling question of why Cable left New Orleans, of whose picturesque life he is likely long to remain the foremost interpreter, for a later home in New England. It is now plain that his real home was New England; his mother, a transplanted Puritan, was ever strong in him; and when he came to Northampton, which had once been the home of Jonathan Edwards, he was merely coming home.

Of course one can never look to an official biography for scandal, and there is none here. Not that scandal could ever attach to Cable's name; but it could to that of an associate of his, and I should have been naughtily pleased to know why Cable occasionally found it impossible to consort with Mark Twain even when the two were on joint lecture tours.

The translation of Mélanie Marnas's *Who Is Then This Man?* is the newest life of Jesus to appear in America; it is published by Dutton (\$2.50). Written from the standpoint of Catholic faith, it is not argumentative or doctrinal. The story moves rapidly with vivid scenes. In its beauty and charm and its emphasis on settings, this book reminds me forcibly of Renan's *Life*. The disciples are made real, and there is much of the life of the times.

But it is an autobiography which seems to me to cap the climax of the biographical literature of the past few months—E. W. Howe's *Plain People* (Dodd, Mead, \$3). In the first place, Ed Howe, long time editor of the Atchison (Kansas) *Globe*, is a great man—an individualist and a philosopher. In the second place, he writes these recollections in his homely, rather unliterary style, and with a freedom which seldom marks any but the great autobiographies. As in his *Story of a Country Town*, Howe here makes his father a chief figure in his narrative; and his father was an extraordinary man.

I hope this book may take its place as an American classic. It would be a reflection on our reading public if it does not find a permanent place.

SHORT STORIES GOOD AND BAD

For some years I have admired two stories by Fannie Hurst—"Humoresque" and "She Walks in Beauty"—admired them while admitting that both had their faults. So when I sent for Miss Hurst's new collection, called *Procession* (Harper, \$2.00), it was with the expectation of finding at least something to like. But even a reviewer must be honest, and I reluctantly confess that these seem to me to be almost the world's worst stories. Sentimental, pretentious, unconvincing, one after another they drag their sorry length through these pages.

One turns with relief to the new *Short Stories from Vanity*

Fair 1926-1927 (Horace Liveright, \$2.50). At least these are amusing. Duvernois, Colette, Morand, Molnar, Schnitzler, and Benchley—to name no other contributors—can do things rather well, and do. *Vanity Fair* has specialized in the two thousand word *conte* of brilliant sophistication. I don't take any stock in Mr. Crowninshield's contention that Americans cannot or do not write stories of that length; *Vanity Fair* likes the continental flavor and it goes to the continent to get it. I cannot forbear to mention one unintentionally funny incident in Thomas Burke's story: the chaste fiancée who goes to bed in damp sheets and wakes up with pneumonia would have a hard time convincing a medic that the dread disease would be so expeditious. But then, if her virtue were not thus ironically rewarded, where would be the point of the story?

The Sherwood Anderson pieces in the foregoing volume are also found in Mr. Anderson's new *Hello Towns!* (Horace Liveright, \$3). Here is an odd but excellent book. I like these books that are neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring, that keep away from the beaten track and get themselves written merely because the author thinks he has something to say. This volume is chiefly a record of Mr. Anderson's two years as a country newspaper man in Smyth County, Virginia. It is full of items from his papers (he has two of them, in the same town) and of his reflections about the doings of the people of his community. A murder case runs serially, as it were, through the book, but is not given undue importance. There are lively, fighting folk in Smyth County, Virginia, as in most counties, and Mr. Anderson is missing nothing. Some of our own Jay Sigmund's poems appear, for Mr. Sigmund has been a contributor to the papers. There are also, as I have said, the *Vanity Fair* stories, since Mr. Anderson has had the courage to reprint them himself. I hope Smyth County people are broad minded enough to let their editor write books about them without running him out of town, for this volume really does much to interpret American life.

Conrad Aiken's stories in *Costumes by Eros* (Scribner, \$2) are uneven, but some of them are surely of very high quality. The first one in the volume, "Your Obituary, Well Written," has an extraordinary delicacy and charm, and the same can be said for "I Love You Very Dearly." These are all love stories, told with much psychological insight. The new collection marks an advance over *Bring! Bring!* the author's earlier book of tales.

The biggest success among recent books of short stories is without doubt Ring Lardner's *Round Up*, which is a collected edition of the author's yarns, thirty-five in number (Scribner \$2.50).

The reason these stories so frequently ring the bell, as Mr. Lardner might put it, is that they are at the same time amusing

and significant. I have had occasion to point out more than once that there is ordinarily a line of cleavage in the American short story of today between those which are written chiefly for entertainment and those which are intended as serious pieces of interpretation. But here are stories which—the best of them, at least—both entertain and interpret. That is the reason for the phenomenon noted on the jacket in the words of Mr. Carl Van Doren: the popularity of Lardner with the *hoi polloi* and the intelligentsia at one and the same time.

There is no need here to insist on the magical handling of the conversation of middle class people, or on the not too obtrusive humor. I wish only to add my voice to the general cheering for Mr. Lardner.

AND MORE DETECKATIVES

The Black Circle, by Mansfield Scott (Clode, \$2) is a good thriller. It opens with an escape from prison that really grips and holds the reader, and the surprise at the end is unexpected enough to delight the most blasé reader of such yarns. This is one of the best of its kind recently published.

Duttons keep up their reputation for good mystery stories with *The King Murder*, by Charles Reed Jones (\$2). There is a good deal of a certain rather better known writer of detective fiction in this, but Leighton Swift is an interesting addition to the gallery of transcendental detectives.

BIRDS AND SPRITES, PUEBLOS AND CANYONS

The Hermit Thrush is the title of a slender new book of verses by Kathleen Millay (Horace Liveright, \$2). There is delicacy and charm in these little poems, with sometimes a note of rebellion and sometimes a bit of that roguish whimsy which we have learned to associate with this poet's sister. The more serious Sacco and Vanzetti things scarcely come off: Mrs. Young is at her best in the "short swallow-flights of song."

William Haskell Simpson makes his first appearance between covers, I believe, in *Along Old Trails* (Houghton, \$2), a book of verses of the Southwest, with an introduction by Alice Corbin Henderson. The best of these are the genre pieces dealing with the pueblo folk—with those "of the wrinkled faces, who nod and nap." There is something of the laconism of the desert in Mr. Simpson's verse.

POEMS AND ESSAYS BY MARY WEBB

The poetical treat of the year, for one reader, at least, is found in the volume *Poems, and The Spring of Joy*, by Mary Webb (Dutton, \$2.50). Mary Webb will be remembered as the author of *Precious Bane*. The present posthumous volume includes about a hundred poems and a series of nature essays.

Every page is a delight: like the foxglove bells she sings of, her verse is "utterly enchanted." She was carried away by the ecstasy of her love for flowers and birds and simple folk, and she carries us away with that same ecstasy. It is in her prose, too—that intense, whole delight in nature. I have not read anything more delightful in years than her essay on "Laughter." As for her thinking, it impresses me continually by its Emersonian quality. All the favorite doctrines of Emerson are there. Mary Webb is a more delicate and whim-loving Thoreau—a transcendentalist enamored of sweetness and light. I commend this golden volume to all MIDLAND readers.

It is lovely to have died when Mary Webb did, leaving so perfect a body of work behind her.

A NEW ANTHOLOGY

26 Adventure Stories, edited by Ernest Rhys and C. A. Dawson-Scott. (Appleton, \$2.50.) In the foreword to this volume, the editors propound their conception of the adventure short story: "a single episode, describing a man or woman in a predicament, an episode which in the main is unrelated to the past or future." Unfortunately, in their selection, the editors have too closely referred to this initial model. And in consequence, one or more of the stories are frankly tepid, as Miss Delafield's *The Lady From the Provinces* and Miss Hemenway's *Adolescence*. The interpretation, of course, is in a sense accurate and thoughtful, but that it lacks something is apparent. The omission should be evident to those in whom the word "adventure" awakens the notion of risk and action and raciness, and these will perhaps find themselves called upon to make only a small response to a few of the stories in this collection. In each instance where the stories do not satisfy, the fault seems to lie with a prescription which has invited the inclusion of psychology and supplanted with static, turbid, subjective escapade the thrilling and dangerous derring do of the old tradition.

On the other hand, it happens that most of the stories, escaping the limits of the definition, do have the popular quality of rash, energetic, and vital living. *A Most Dangerous Game* surely has: casting back, the editors retrieve a fine prize fight incident from Hazlitt; *Retreat*, a war story, is strongly written: stories by Neil Munro, F. R. Buckley, Taffrail, A. E. Dingle and H. De Vere Stacpoole reflect from the old standards of the adventure story and run a varied gamut of situations, the sea, the west, the tropics, and war. Moreover, a pleasant practice, the inclusion of one or two old favorites, a practice that should never be neglected by anthologists even when they seek to avoid the worn sources, has here been observed. This volume, like

its predecessors by the same editors, 26 *Mystery Stories*, 28 *Humorous Stories*, 29 *Love Stories*, etc., makes decidedly good reading.

H. H.

BIOGRAPHICAL

NELIA GARDNER WHITE will be remembered for her story *The Wish* in *THE MIDLAND* of September, 1928, and for earlier contributions. She lives at Buffalo, New York.

SARA HIMLINSKY is a young writer. Her home is in Cleveland.

JOHN UPTON TERRELL, whose home is at Chicago, has spent the best share of his life in travel and newspaper work. This is his first contribution to *THE MIDLAND*.

GLENN WARD DREBACH has been a frequent contributor to *THE MIDLAND*. He sends us these poems from Chicago.

HARRY HARTWICK, a student at the University of Iowa, is at present editorial assistant on *THE MIDLAND*.

CHARLES MALAM is a Rhodes scholar from Vermont, now studying at Oxford. His first book of verse was published last year while he was still an undergraduate.

ALLEN E. WOODALL lives and writes at Minneapolis, where he is at present teaching English in the state university.

LEO L. WARD is an instructor in English at the University of Notre Dame. He has been a frequent contributor to recent numbers of *THE MIDLAND*.

ELLEN GLINES lives in San Juan, Porto Rico. Her first contribution to *THE MIDLAND* was published in the January, 1929, issue.

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J. O. O'MEARA, Notary Public.
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